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ABSTRACT

The instructor/author first started to think about the relationship between time and literacy when she was writing her dissertation and doing a study in a first-year composition course at a community college in Chicago. She realized that many teachers at community colleges think about the issue of time, as they realize it is something their students simply do not have. And she noted that "Jack," the instructor of the class she was observing, brought time for literacy into the equation by his approach in which he guided his students step-by-step through the process of an assignment. A variety of statistics show how issues of time are important for all kinds of institutions (but especially for community colleges)--for example, 75% of community college students work and are less involved on their campus compared to students at 4-year institutions. The author/instructor begins her own community college classes with a writing prompt which queries her students on their reading/writing memories and feelings. Some of their responses show how negatively they consider the relationship between time and literacy--literacy takes time to achieve, time they do not have; and literacy takes away their time, therefore they do not want to give any time to it if they do not have to. More and more it seems as though time is becoming an issue for both teachers and students. (Contains 10 works. Definitions of academic literacy and functional literacy, a course schedule worksheet, statistics on community college students, and student comments are attached.) (NKA)

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Time for Literacy

Cassandra Phillips

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Time for Literacy

Part I: The Idea

I first started thinking about the relationship between time and literacy when I was writing my dissertation a couple of years ago. At the time, I was doing a study at a small community college in Chicago. I was observing a first-year composition course and its instructor, and I was looking for different ideas and/or representations of literacy operating within the classroom. Even before I began to analyze my data, I began to see that this instructor spent a great deal of time making students understand how much *time* is required for literacy. It made me realize that this is something students know, but don't really think about—*literacy requires time*. And something I've come to realize since then is that a lot of teachers at two-year or community colleges think about this issue of time, as they realize it is something that their students simply don't have.

There were a couple of ways I noticed that the instructor I studied, or Jack as I shall call him, brought *time for literacy* into the equation. The first way was through his process for introducing each essay. He took extra time to go over the goals of each essay on the day that it was introduced. He then provided a number of handouts for each assignment—each assignment had a sequence, or a number of smaller activities that lead up to the larger one. This approach seemed rooted in a kind of functional literacy in the sense that students were guided step by step through the process of an assignment.[1]

[1] See handout for extended definition of "functional literacy."

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Not only was the assignment broken down, so was the *time* in which it took to complete it. Having students complete parts of the assignments in sequence was one step to this process. The next step was having those parts completed in class. This process assured that they had the time to do so.

I saw this as a kind of manipulation of literacy in a way that brought time into the equation. Jack made sure that students who normally didn't have the time to work on these assignments did—and in that sense he was creating a new kind of academically literate people through more functional techniques. At the end of the semester I circulated questionnaires for the students in which I asked them several questions about literacy and about the course, and I'll talk more about some of those responses a little later. One student remarked as that what he most appreciated about the course was that Jack "wanted them to take time on your assignments [. . .], he wants you to plan ahead so you don't get behind and he wants you to read carefully because he wants you to understand what he is explaining." At least one other student commented in the questionnaire that what Jack valued most in the course was work ethic. This attention to functional literacies (in order to achieve more academic ones) Jack later told me came from his 30 plus years experience as a community college teacher. He had seen a number of students fail his course as they were unable to complete assignments due to time constraints. By attempting to focus on the time element, he takes functional and academic and/or cultural literacy to another level by getting to the root of the problem and making it more accessible to his students.

The extended, more formal definition of academic/cultural literacies is on the handout as well.

Now that I have been teaching at a two-year college for a few years myself, I know how important it is for me to bring time for literacy into the equation. I learned very early that the majority of my students work more than part time or have families to support. I tried to set up study groups or activities outside of class only to find that to work around students' work schedules is nearly impossible. A lot of these students barely have the time to come to class, let alone spend adequate time outside of class preparing for it.

Another example I wanted to talk about is one where Jack most obviously considers time for literacy. It took place on the first day of the course, although activities like this one continued on throughout the rest of the semester. Along with the course syllabus and the departmental syllabus he distributed a handout titled "Student Course Schedule Worksheet." This worksheet consisted of a grid that was divided on one side by each half hour of the day and on the other side each day of the week.[2]

He then told the students to fill out a complete schedule of the classes they were taking, the hours they were working, the time they needed to baby sit or care for their families or whatever. He then used the schedule to talk about studying and study methods, establishing a study schedule, and just basically, as he said, "the process of doing…of knowing where you are set up in terms of time."

Then, the next time that the course met, he had the following exchange with several of the students in the course—and I wanted to read this directly from the transcription because I think it shows that sort of naivete that students have about how much time is should be allotted for each of their courses:

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[2] See handout for a copy of the grid distributed to students.

Jack: Okay, I'd like you to dig out the schedule that I asked you to fill out the other day. One of the first things that we want to go over in terms of setting up your schedule and for today is [. . .] at least in theory you have blocked in all of those hours that you have committed. You filled out your classes [. . .] what I would like you to do is add onto this the specifically dedicated study time for your particular classes. The idea is [. . .] to set aside an appropriate amount of time for you to be able to get your work done for your col' ge classes. Juan.[3]

Juan: Huh?

Jack: How many hours are you taking?

Juan: Twelve

Jack: Twelve hours? Four classes?

Juan: Yes

Jack: Okay, how many hours did you plan when you signed up for those classes to study?

Juan: Uh…(silence)

Jack: No clue?

Juan: Well, I don't know. I wanted to sign up for the minimum [. . .] so I could play soccer, you know [. . .]

Jack: So you signed up for four classes because that was the minimum amount for you to play soccer? How much time do you think you are going to have to study for those classes?

Juan: Uh, maybe three hours a day?

[3] Pseudonyms have been used for student names.

> *Jack*: Three hours a day. So that means you are going to set up around 15 hours a week [. . .] (Rhetoric 8-9)

After this exchange, Jack moved onto another student, and then another, asking specifically how many courses they are taking and how many hours a day or a week they plan on studying for those courses. When he told them that the college rule of thumb is to study "two hours outside for every hour inside" the students seemed genuinely shocked. And when they looked at the schedules they have completed, the majority of them saw that they just weren't able to fit in everything that they had planned to while allowing enough time to study for their courses. This seemed to be a major moment of recognition for some of the students. I saw several students shake their heads, roll their eyes, or even laugh as they made comments like "There's no way I could study that much" or "If that's the case I would do nothing but study all day." There was certainly a lot of disbelief.

After their discussion of schedules, Jack then spoke about how trying to do too much can affect their schooling in a variety of ways:

> Now [. . .] there are people who have to work. You have to pay tuition, you have to support your families, etc., whatever is going on. But the real question, the real thing that you look at in terms of the schedule is if you don't set aside enough time for yourself, then you get to a point where all of the sudden you feel what? Something's wrong with me, I'm not smart enough. And none of you are stupid [. . .] I know you are smart enough. (Rhetoric 23)

He then spent the remainder of the class that day discussing specific study methods, going through each detail very specifically. When I asked Jack about using such a schedule, he said that it has been a part of his course for some time. Again, he has had a lot of difficulties with

students not passing or missing class because of the demands of their schedules. The majority of students at this institution have jobs, full or part-time, as well as families and it often contributes to the difficulties they have with the course. When I spoke to a few of the students in his course about the scheduling lesson, a couple of them said they really appreciated it. "I guess I never really knew how much time school took" one woman said.

At least one student at the end of the course identified a functional form of literacy as what she remembers Jack valuing. In her questionnaire, she wrote that what Jack valued the most in the course was "to take time on your assignments [. . .] he wants you to plan ahead so you don't get behind and he wants you to read carefully because he wants you to understand what he is explaining." Another student commented, "I believe a high school education was necessary for this course, but the main value was work ethic." In addition, a number of students, in response to the question, "What in particular have you learned in this class that you think will help you outside of the classroom?" made reference to learning how to write a letter (in the newspaper unit) and learning how to take notes and how to study in school.

Part II: The Statistics

So this is how I became interested in time and literacy. And now that I work at a two-year college, it has become more and more interesting to me. Some of these statistics, however, show how issues of time are important for all kinds of institutions. Here's just a sampling of some of the statistics I've found interesting in relation to time and literacy. While most of statistics concern community college students, these types of students exist at all institutions, and therefore this issue of time becomes relevant no matter where we teach.

- Community college students are more likely (than four-year students) to be influenced by family, employment, and financial obligations (Bean & Metzner).
- Overall, 75% of community college students work. Half of those work full time (Eric Review).
- Overall, community college students are less involved on their campus compared to students at four-year institutions, participating less frequently in campus organizations and rarely attending campus-sponsored events (Murrell and Swigart).
- Women make up 58% of community College enrollees (Phillippe and Patton)
- Women bring with them unique issues and difficulties. Adult women report high levels of stress from parenting, financial constraints, and health concerns (Johnson, Schwartz, and Bower).
- First-generation college students (who attend all kinds of institutions) are more likely to work over 35 hours a week, or to work full time (Billson and Terry).
- Most first-generation college students do not leave college for academic reasons. They leave because they are torn between the responsibilities of school, work, and home (Brooks-Terry).

Part III: The Students

I'd like to end with a little exploration of how students feel about the time and literacy issue. For quite some time now, I've been starting my courses with the following writing prompt:

> Believe it or not, you are already quite experienced with both reading and writing, and in some areas you may even be considered an expert. For this diagnostic writing piece, I would like you to think about yourself as a literate human being, and consider the following questions:

- *What is your earliest memory of reading and/or writing?*
- *Who (or what) was most influential in your learning to read or write?*
- *Are your early memories of reading and writing positive or negative? Why?*
- *How do you think those feelings have changed over the years? Why?*
- *Currently, what kinds of reading and writing do you participate in regularly?*
- *What are your favorite and least favorite things to read and write? Why?*
- *Do you feel that certain conventions (school, work) prohibit you from enjoying reading and writing? In what ways?*
- *In what ways do you hope to change or develop your literacy skills in this course?*

Please note that this is merely an exercise to help me get to know you all a little better, and, more importantly, to help you start thinking about yourselves as readers, writers, and learners. Please focus on thinking and answering the questions and do not worry too much about grammar, neatness, appearance, etc. As long as I can read it, it will be fine. Also, try and think about types of reading and writing you do that you don't usually consider for this type of exercise—for example, do you write letters? Read magazines? Comic books? Mysteries? Do you write grocery lists or memos? Try and consider *every* kind of reading and writing that you do.

I do this assignment for a variety of reasons, but mainly because I want first-year students to see that they are already active users of literacy in a variety of ways (and this is something that many teachers to in many different ways—I saw it with Jack's initial assignments, and I've seen it with my colleagues as well).

But once I started thinking about time and literacy, I started to notice the way my students seem to think about time and literacy. Many of their responses to these questions, especially the one about conventions that keep them from enjoying reading and writing, display an almost antagonistic attitude towards time—it keeps them from doing what they want to do. And seeing that they are entering a college English course where they usually feel unsure or inadequate about their literacy skills, they see that time is what has kept them from being as literate as they want to be.

Consider the following responses[4]:

[4] These responses are also included in the handout.

- I just don't have time to read. I have too many other responsibilities. I used to like to read I guess. But now it isn't even an option. –Mike
- School definitely keeps me from enjoying anything related to literacy. I have to read long textbooks all the time and they are boring. I don't read for pleasure ever, it seems. --Rachel
- I've always thought that reading and writing have kept me from doing things I want to do more, like go outside or see my friends. That's why I don't like it. –Pat
- The only things I like to read are magazines. They're short and easy. --Maria

These are just a few of the responses I've gotten where students consider the relationship between time and literacy, and usually in a negative manner. But these answers all seem to show the negative way in which students look at time, and often, therefore look at literacy. Literacy takes time to achieve—time they don't have. And literacy also takes away their time, therefore they don't want to give any time to it they don't have to.

So while I continue to explore the relationship between literacy and time, I have begun to look beyond the way teachers consider time when they teach literacy, I have also started to look at the way students might develop negative attitudes about literacy when they don't have the time they need to participate in it the way they would like. And someday I hope to come up with some ways to help ease the relationship between the two—because more and more it seems as though that issue of time is becoming an issue for both teachers and students.

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CCCC's Chicago 2002

Literacy and Time: Supplemental Information

Definitions:

Academic Literacy

Academic and/or Cultural literacy advocates want to maintain what Patricia Bizzell calls "transcendent standards" (239), or specific traditions in regard to reading and writing. One of the most prominent figures in regard to cultural literacy is E.D. Hirsch. His "privileged ideology" of literacy values formal Standard English as the most "communicatively efficient" form of the language. Hirsch defines literate culture as

> [. . .] the most democratic culture in our land: it excludes nobody; it cuts across generations and social groups and classes; it is not usually one's first culture, but it should be everybody's second, existing as it does beyond the narrow spheres of family neighborhood, and religion. (*Philosophy of Composition* 21).

Functional Literacy

"Functional Literacy" is a commonly perceived notion of literacy and centers around the idea of a skill-based literacy that can be "taught" or used for a specific purpose or purposes. As defined by Carman Hunter and David Harman in their 1979 frequently cited *Adult Illiteracy in the United States: A Report to the Ford Foundation*, functional literacy is perceived as:

> [. . .] the possession of skills perceived as necessary by particular persons and groups to fulfill their own self-determined objectives as family and community members, citizens, consumers, job-holders, and members of social, religious, or other associations of their choosing. (17)

Jack's Course Worksheet:

Student Course Schedule Worksheet

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
8:00 a.m.							
8:30 a.m.							
9:00 a.m.							
9:30 a.m.							
10:00 a.m.							
10:30 a.m.							
11:00 a.m.							
11:30 a.m.							
12:00 p.m.							
12:30 p.m.							
1:00 p.m.							
1:30 p.m.							
2:00 p.m.							
2:30 p.m.							
3:00 p.m.							
3:30 p.m.							
4:00 p.m.							
4:30 p.m.							
5:00 p.m.							
5:30 p.m.							
6:00 p.m.							
6:30 p.m.							
7:00 p.m.							
7:30 p.m.							
8:00 p.m.							
8:30 p.m.							
9:00 p.m.							
9:30 p.m.							

To Be Arranged:

Statistics:

- Community college students are more likely (than four-year students) to be influenced by family, employment, and financial obligations (Bean & Metzner).
- Overall, 75% of community college students work. Half of those work full time (Eric Review).
- Overall, community college students are less involved on their campus compared to students at four-year institutions, participating less frequently in campus organizations and rarely attending campus-sponsored events (Murrell and Swigart).
- Women make up 58% of community College enrollees (Phillippe and Patton)
- Women bring with them unique issues and difficulties. Adult women report high levels of stress from parenting, financial constraints, and health concerns (Johnson, Schwartz, and Bower).
- First-generation college students (who attend all kinds of institutions) are more likely to work over 35 hours a week, or to work full time (Billson and Terry).
- Most first-generation college students do not leave college for academic reasons. They leave because they are torn between the responsibilities of school, work, and home (Brooks-Terry).

Student Reflections:

- I just don't have time to read. I have too many other responsibilities. I used to like to read I guess. But now it isn't even an option. –Mike
- School definitely keeps me from enjoying anything related to literacy. I have to read long textbooks all the time and they are boring. I don't read for pleasure ever, it seems. --Rachel
- I've always thought that reading and writing have kept me from doing things I want to do more, like go outside or see my friends. That's why I don't like it. –Pat
- The only things I like to read are magazines. They're short and easy. --Maria

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